

# TIMES JOURNAL

July 29, 2009

The News of Schoharie County

\$1.00

The hometown paper of Schoharie County Sunshine Fair.

www.timesjournalonline.com

Cobleskill, New York  
133rd year — No. 30

## Arboretum fights back, reaches out

By Jim Poole

Lilacs on Facebook?

Well, not really. But facebook and other electronic connectors are helping the Landis Arboretum survive the deep recession.

It was back in December that Arboretum Director Thom O'Connor, correctly predicting the recession hit non-profits especially hard, began taking measures to endure hard times.

Those steps and others have helped, the Arboretum, like many other public and private entities, has it rough.

"It's going to be very, very tough to get through 2009 and very, very tough to get through 2010," said Treasurer Barbara Brabetz.

Yet Mr. O'Connor is cautiously optimistic the Arboretum has done this well. Visits to the 500 acres of gardens, old-growth forests and woodland trails are up sharply in '09.

"There have been more visitors this spring than I've ever seen and most of the people who have been here a long time have seen," Mr. O'Connor said.

"It's mostly families—weekdays and weekends."

He attributes the increased visits to the Arboretum's presence on Facebook, Twitter and Capital District magazines and radio stations.

"We've tried to get the Arboretum out there in as many ways as possible," Mr. O'Connor said.

"Some of the families that come here the first time know the trails or know what they want to see, so they've seen us on facebook or somewhere else. People are discovering the Arboretum because we're really putting ourselves out there."

Money is still tight, of course. The Board of Directors cut the budget from \$200,000 in 2008 to \$168,000 this year, Ms. Brabetz said.

And membership is down, too, according to President Anne Donnelly, though she understands why.

"Are you going to buy food for the kids or membership in a charity?" she asked. "It's really a no-brainer."

Private and corporate donations—major revenue sources—have declined, too, but Mr. O'Connor has made adjustments by cutting costs accordingly and seeking funds elsewhere.

For instance, besides the cost-cutting energy measures instituted in December, the Arboretum now cuts much less grass for trails.

"It's going green, as we should be," Mr. O'Connor said. "We mow less, so we need less gas and fewer people."

"And we recycle everything. Stuff that comes through the fax machine or computer we flip over and use the other side."

Director of Horticulture Fred Breglia now uses newspaper mulch to reduce weeding and spraying, another savings.

Also, there are only two paid employees—Mr. O'Connor and Mr. Breglia. Volunteers carry much of the load.

"Our board of directors puts in an enormous amount of time," Mr. O'Connor said. "They don't just make policy. They do everything they have to do."

And then there are fundraisers. Mr. O'Connor asks his directors to think six months in advance to plan events that will pump up the budget.

A recent outdoor summer gala—this year, naturally, in a downpour—raised \$3,000.

"It took months to plan and was a lot of work for \$3,000," Ms. Brabetz observed.

A new event on August 23 is the Hot Tunes for Hard Times concert. Nine area bands and performers are donating their time for the event, put together by supporter Walter Wouk.

"It should be a funday," Mr. O'Connor said. "It will be the kind of day when you can laze on the lawn and listen to music."

The Arboretum has also rolled its fall plant sale and 5K run into one event on September 19. One large event, Mr. O'Connor said, is likely to draw a larger crowd than two smaller dates.

Another event, though not a fundraiser, is Boy Scout Troop 501's camporee in October. The Troop, supported by the Arboretum, is hoping to bring in Scouts from around the area to camp for the weekend.

"It's a way to make more people aware of the Arboretum," Mr. O'Connor said. "It's another way to reach out to the public."

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